Chapter 12

The Penetration of Islam into Mossi Country

Islam in the Land of the Mogho Naba

643 794 771 The Mogho Naba, like his subjects, is above all an animist, and it is hard to understand how he reconciles his fetishism with the complex dogmas of Islam and with the many interdictions of Christianity.

The Mogho Naba, however, is quite capable of being a Catholic or a Moslem on appropriate occasions and at the same time respecting the traditions of his ancestors. Thus, when the Christians celebrate Christmas, the emperor of the Mossi devoutly attends Midnight Mass. He keeps his cap on, however, just as the bishop wears his miter. In the same way he embraces Islam during the following three festivals: the moaghrem (the Mossi zembendé); Ramadan (nolokré, "to loosen the mouth"); and, finally, the zoulhési (the Mossi tabaski or kibsa).

797 Before describing how the Mogho Naba celebrates these Moslem festivals, we shall give a brief history of Islam among the Mossi and discuss the appointment of imams.

The Arrival of Islam among the Mossi

797 793 It was during the reign of Naba Doulgou, the twenty-third Mogho Naba [204] after Oubri, founder of the Ouagadougou dynasty, that Islam took root in the empire of the Mogho Naba, and it was at that time that an imam was appointed at Ouagadougou.

Naba Sawadogo, who succeeded his father, Doulgou, sent his children to the Koranic school. Many of them obtained a fairly good education there, and the eldest son, who later succeeded to the throne under the name of Naba Koutou, even became a marabout. The development of Islam in Mossi country dates from his reign, as does practice of giving children of the Mogho Naba Moslem names such as Saïdou, Mahama, Moumouni, etc.

The Moslem Naba

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771 1. Virtually all of the inhabitants of Nobéré, Nobila, and Toècé (cantons in the present province of the Gounga Naba) are converts to Islam for reasons of personal convenience. They are the descendants of Naba Saga, twenty-second successor of Oubri.

2. The inhabitants of the villages of Doundoulma (descendants of Naba Kom, twenty-first successor of Oubri), Garpinné, and Kouila (descendants of Naba Doulgou or Roulgou, twenty-third successor of Oubri) are reputed to be devout Moslems. [211]

3. Kombissiri Naba Siguiri, circle of Ouagadougou.

4. Ramongo Naba Baongo, circle of Koudougou. Both of the above were descendants of Naba Warba nineteenth successor of Oubri, and were converted to Islam.

The present chiefs of these cantons are educated Moslems and possess mosques.

5. Sao Naba, a descendant of Naba Ouédraogo, circle of Ouagadougou, was converted nearly thirty years ago. His first teacher was a pilgrim returned from Mecca and a native of the village of Nakamtenga (near Kombissiri). He continued his study of the Koran under the direction of Sayenouné Bathily, a marabout originally from Kaédi (Mauretania) who was such a formidable thaumaturge that the local administration had to send him home in 1916. Sao Naba has a mosque, but it would appear that the Moslem religion has not diminished his animistic beliefs since he continues to make sacrifices to the manes and to drink beer from time to time (on customary feast days, for example).

6. Gourpila Naba (circle of Ouagadougou) is a former samand' biga of the present Mogho Naba and his conversion to Islam is recent, within the last six or seven years.

7. Boala Naba (circle of Ouagadougou) is a devout Moslem.

8. Gaongo Naba (circle of Ouagadougou) is also a devout Moslem. [212]

In conclusion let us point out that the present emperor continues the tradition of giving Moslem names to his children and has several of his sons in Koranic schools. There is no doubt that more of his children are being educated in these schools than in the official primary school. [213]

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777 157 It would seem that living as they do in the midst of spirits who permeate the air, the earth, the fire, the houses, the fields, and everything else, and who are not always in an accommodating mood, the Mossi would live in a perpetual state of terror since they have everything to fear from the poisoners during the day, the seuya during the night, but this is not the case. The Mossi are a light-hearted people; they like to laugh, and they do not look a bit worried. Once, as I pointed this out to an old man, he replied: "Everyone does not have enemies. And then, why worry about the inevitable?" In fact, those dreadful sorcerers are only to be feared by those who know that they have an enemy and that he can resort to the power of the sorcerers. The spirits are pacified with sacrifices, and if a soul is seized at night by a seuya, the only thing to do is to try one's best to release it.

Furthermore, like so many others, the Mossi easily forget all these beliefs in the course of everyday life and act as if they were masters of their own actions and confident of achieving their goals. Laughingly and playfully they toss sticks and stones at the wind eddies that whirl by, stirring up the dust and dry leaves. And yet, how many spirits and sorcerers may they conceal, each more dreadful than the next! The most ardent believers consult sorcerers and offer sacrifices before every undertaking; the others only bother with sacrifices on the Day of the Dead and when misfortune strikes. Is it not suffering that recalls us to the religious life, because it reminds us of our dependence on a power greater than ours? Here as elsewhere, there are ardent and lukewarm believers; no one seems to be indifferent, and atheism is unknown. They are not yet sufficiently civilized for such ideas!

000 Their conversion to Catholicism seems to be only a matter of time. Messis quidem multa, operarii autem pauci. /The harvest is great, but the workers are few./ May the Master of the Harvest dispatch many workers to this land and hasten the day when the whole of this people will enter the divine fold!

/108/ CONCLUSION

181 By way of conclusion, we shall now attempt to draw in rough outline the mental characteristics of the Mossi as we see them.

642 In short, the Mossi enjoyed the benefits of a strong and cen-
648 tralized government, established no doubt in former times at the price of large-scale massacres and exterminations. And this is what makes us ponder and what is, so to speak, the reverse side of the Black conquerors' coin. It is probable that Oubry, the founder of the Mossi empire in /584/ the twelfth century, was in his time something of a Samory or a Rabah. He probably managed to establish his empire only through the crushing, pillage, and massacre of a tremendous number of small, independent Black villages or small Lélésé, Nounouma, Boussansé, and Habé cantons. Yet in the nineteenth century, on the soil of this empire established at such a price, there were 25 inhabitants per square kilometer, while among the neighboring Gourounsi who have retained their freedom there are the 5 or 6 inhabitants per square kilometer common to West Africa as a whole. In addition, while the Gourounsi were prey to the Songhay, the Habé to the Toucouleur, and the Malinké and Bambara to Samory, our Mossi lived in safety. They had less independence and anarchistic freedom, but they had internal peace and external security. They had to obey their chiefs, but they knew no domestic struggles, no crushing by foreign pillagers. In short, the Mossi had entered upon the course of orderly government, and represented a superior state of civilization.

● 771 Now, we need only furnish a few details on Mossi religion. The majority of the Mossi population has remained fetishistic.

771 We saw above that the Mossi, at the time of their great ex-
648 pansion in the bend of the Niger, came into conflict with a Moslemized empire, the Mali empire, and that the second Songhay empire also led redoutable religious crusades against the Mossi. Under such circumstances the Mossi were bound to regard Islam as a foe. It is true that later the destruction of the second Songhay empire by the Moroccans (1591) brought peace to the Mossi on their northern frontier and freed them from the fear of Moslem invasion. The Yarsé settled in turn among the Mossi, and owing to their intelligence, industry, and capacity for trade, created for themselves a well-respected position. This was bound to incline the Mossi favorably toward Islam, or at least to lessen their prejudices and

771 their traditional fear. Nevertheless, Captain Lambert says that
648 prior to the French occupation, Moslems were forbidden by the
[798] Moro Naba to /585/ say their prayers (kella) publicly. They merely recited their rosary (séki) silently.

797 Since the French occupation, the Mossi have lost all their prejudices against Islam, because they have been conquered by a different foe. In addition the Moslems tell them, as they do everywhere else in West Africa, that the Whites will only be vanquished and will only leave the country when everyone has become a Moslem. This leads the Mossi to start salaaming, and actually it is probable that there have been more conversions to Islam among the Mossi since our occupation than prior to it. This result, which may appear strange at first, is indubitable. Actually these conversions, although more numerous than they used to be, are still rare if we consider that the enormous majority of the Mossi population and the territory as a whole remains fetishistic.

Let us proceed to a description of Mossi religious customs.

787 First, the funeral ceremonies.

755 When a Mossi is ill he summons a soothsayer (bara in Mossi). The latter takes some earth and looks at it to see what will happen to the sick man. Then he states either that the latter will get well, on condition of obliging with a sheep and a chicken, or else that he will die. In the first case the requested chicken and sheep are brought to the bara, and then, if the sick person gets well, he gets something else, a sheep or 5,000 cowries. If the sick person dies, contrary to prediction, the family merely says that the bara was a liar and nothing else happens.

764 If the deceased is a man, it is the family elders who care for him. They stretch his limbs and even his fingers so he will not turn rigid immediately, and they close his eyes. Then one of the elders washes the corpse with cold water in the presence of the whole family. After this, the elders sew a shroud with cotton bands to wrap around the deceased, and then he is rolled up in a mat.

The soukala chiefs (we know that among the Mossi every household head is the head of a soukala) are buried in the courtyard /586/ of their soukala, or else before its gate. The grave diggers are fetched, and they dig a hole the size of a man, lay the corpse at the bottom, and place boards above it to prevent the soil from weighing

The Mossi grow tobacco in fields around their
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homesteads, where they also cultivate their most important cash crops, cotton and indigo, which are used in the manufacture and dyeing of cotton cloth.

136 The wild fauna of Mossi country include several species of antelope, deer, monkeys, rabbits, snakes, and wild pigs. Elephants roam the beds of rivers and streams and often destroy cultivated fields, while lions and hyenas distress the people by attacking livestock. The pools and rivers of Mossi country are inhabited by turtles, crocodiles, and various species of scaled and scaleless fish. Chickens, muscovy ducks, and half-domesticated guinea fowl are the most valuable species of birds.

231 [492] [439] The Mossi have long been famous for their splendid donkeys and horses. Donkeys are sometimes ridden, but they are used primarily as beasts of burden. Horses are important for military and ceremonial purposes and for export to the tsetse-fly zones to the south. The Mossi raise two main types of cattle: a zebu-like animal in the northern regions and a [439] dwarf variety in the south. These animals are raised primarily for their milk and for export, and are seldom killed for meat until they are fairly old. Goats and sheep provide the main source of meat. Hog-raising is not widespread, and seems to be declining in importance with the increased ob- [771] [178] servance of Islamic food taboos, which is on the uprise even among people who are still pagans.

135 The subsoil of Mossi country is not well known, but so far there have been no major discoveries of mineral deposits. The only known gold field [301] remained unworked in aboriginal times. The Mossi do not like to wear [325] gold ornaments, preferring jewelry worked from imported copper and [430] silver. The northern Mossi worked their local iron in aboriginal times, but those in the south obtained this metal from caravan traders.

175 439 [443] The nineteenth-century reports of Barth and other European travelers indicate that the Mossi conducted a rather extensive foreign trade. At least six caravan routes passed through their territory, and traders such as the Hausa and Mandingo visited the important Mossi trading centers at Yako, Pouitenga, and Ouagadougou, where they exchanged Saharan and forest products for Mossi livestock and cloth.[3]

101 [197] The Mossi belong to the Voltaic culture area, a name given by Delafosse to the regions drained by the Black, Red, and White Voltas and their tributaries. The area embraces parts of Mali, the Ivory Coast, Dahomey, the Upper Volta, and northern Ghana.[4] It includes a vast congeries of peoples such as the Dagomba, Mamprusi, Dagari, Birifo, Senufo, Gurmanche, Gurunsi, Lobi, Bobo, Tallensi, Konkomba, Dogon, Somba, Fulse, and Ninisi, all of whom speak languages belonging to the Gur or Moshi-Grunshi group of

11: Skinner E-5 (1955-1957) 1964
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spirits. The chiefs could not refuse such requests, especially when the villagers were poor, because they were regarded as "fathers of their people." In some cases, however, district chiefs had to protect their subjects against unscrupulous Tengsobadamba who took advantage of local crises and tried to prey upon the villagers by refusing to perform the requisite sacrifices unless they received substantial gifts. The ensuing struggle was between the secular and the sacred; between the chief as a representative of the conquerors, and the Tengsoba as a member of the conquered group. It was always resolved in favor of the Mossi chief, who never permitted his Tengsobadamba the same privileges held by religious practitioners in neighboring societies.[9] The Mossi chiefs recognized that they needed the Tengsobadamba, and many myths recount how invading Mossi chiefs went into the woods where the Tengsobadamba were hiding to beseech and eventually force them to return to their districts so that sacrifices might be continued. On the other hand, the Mossi chiefs always insisted on the primacy of the nam over any other power. They employed the Tengsobadamba to intercede with Tenga for the welfare of their subjects, but they never allowed the priests to control them.

The coming of Moslems to the kingdom of Ouagadougou had little effect on the way in which the Mogho Nanamse used the traditional religious system to bolster their political power.[10] In fact, the Mossi rulers later used Islam and its adherents in the same manner as they had used the aboriginal religion. The Moslems first tried to subdue the Mossi in the fifteenth century by persuasion, and later by the jihad. Both attempts failed, but the Moslems finally entered Mossi country as refugees from Sudanese wars. Their fortunes waxed and waned, depending on whether they were befriended by the ruler in whose territory they lived. During certain periods, they were subjected to many restrictions and were forbidden by the Mogho Naba to recite their prayers in public places.[11] At other times, they were left free to practice their religion, and even succeeded in converting several Mogho Nanamse to Islam. Under converts such as Savadogo (ca. 1760), Islam spread into many districts and gave rise to such important local centers as Sakhaboutenga (Dakay).

The Moslems in Ouagadougou were represented at the court by their Imam. This person even received his badge of office—a white turban and white robe—from the Mogho Naba, and had to swear in the name of Allah and *Nabiyama* (the prophet Mohammed) to be faithful to him, obey him, and aid him in times of need. However, he did not have to drink the namtibo as suggested by Dim Delobson; nor did he have to observe such non-Moslem customs as drinking the millet beer the Mogho Naba provided for

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his guests.[13] On the contrary, when the Imam visited the ruler on Fridays or during important festivals to read from the Koran, the sovereign gave him sweetened millet water and appropriate gifts.

Most Mossi rulers at all levels had Moslems among their councillors. These men were often the only persons who had traveled extensively outside the country (on pilgrimages to Mecca), and thus could counsel a ruler about how to deal with foreign visitors. Most early European visitors to Mossi country were either helped or hindered (chiefly the latter, it seems) by these travel-wise councillors. Crozat had difficulties with the Moslems long before he arrived in Mossi country proper. When he got to Lanfiera, the Mossi who lived there were alarmed, and refused to help him proceed to Ouagadougou despite his protestations that "I come for the good of all, white and black, that we may be together like brothers, since the same God has made us all." Crozat reports that his plea was in vain because "El Hadj All-Karl declared that he would not receive me, and he will not receive me. El Hadj is wise, El Hadj is prudent, El Hadj knows all, El Hadj does not make decisions without good foresight, and once made, he keeps them."[13]

Crozat had the same difficulty when he entered Mossi country. He tells us, "At Dounse [near Yako], for example, the marabouts did not look favorably upon my arrival, and it took a great deal of insistence on the part of Moussa to convince the Imam, my unwilling host, to present me to the chief who had expressed the desire to see me."[14] Crozat also found that he had to lodge with the Imam when he arrived at Ouagadougou, and he was assigned the same huts "which had served Captain Binger," who had visited the capital before him. He was disappointed with his reception and declares:

> I already knew from experience what sort of influence these men exercised over the chiefs. As a councillor of the chief, the Imam was overtly acknowledged as the second official in the village, but in reality he often commanded it. The Imam of Ouagadougou, therefore, could do much to help me or to hurt me. My decision to court him might flatter him, and that would be a move in the direction of winning his good graces, which, all things considered, was most important to me. The result was only partly in my favor. I succeeded insofar as the Imam was not hostile to me, but he did not help me as he might have.[15]

These Moslem councillors realized better than most other people what the visits of the Europeans implied for the independence of the country, and they tried their best to counsel the monarchs against receiving such visitors.

Beginning with Mogho Naba Doulougou (ca. 1750) Mossi sovereigns, whether Moslem or pagan, participated in the more important Moslem festi-

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771 795 643 796 184 vals. Being monarchs of the Mossi, they could not do otherwise. A few days before the Moslem feast of Tabaski (called *Kibsa* by the Mossi), the Mogho Naba sent the Imam of Ouagadougou cattle and sheep to be sacrificed on the holy day. On the day of the festival, the Mogho Naba and his entourage went to the mosque and joined the Imam and his flock in prayer. After the ceremony the sovereign returned to his palace and ordered that a well-washed sheep be given to the Imam for a sacrifice. This Moslem sacrifice was performed in the palace courtyard, and the Mogho Naba himself held the tail of the animal while the Imam officiated. The Mogho Naba afterward ordered his servants to provide millet water and food for his Moslem subjects. Similar ceremonies were held in all of the districts and villages where Moslems lived.

The feast at the end of the Moslem month of Ramadan was also celebrated by the Mogho Naba and most of the people within the kingdom—a fact that so surprised Binger that he wrote, "It is a most curious fact that, whether Moslem or not, all the blacks celebrate this feast."[16] The Moslems usually flattered the Mogho Naba and the other chiefs by pretending to believe that they had observed the month-long fast (which the Mossi called *no-lwere*, from *nore*, "mouth," and *lwere*, "to tie up") during Ramadan. [576] Thus, whenever they visited the Mogho Naba or another chief during this period, they greeted him with the salutation *Ne no-lwere*, which means, "I greet you who are fasting." Similarly, the morning after the end of the fasting period, the ruler and his officials were ritually given millet water "to break their fast." The important point here is that everyone knew that the Mogho Naba's fast was a ritual fiction. Binger, who was with Boukary Naba at the end of Ramadan before this prince became Mogho Naba Wobogo, commented: "Boukary Naba is a Moslem in outward appearance only. When the prayers were about to begin, he asked me whether I was going to worship. I told him that this festival was not in accord with those of the Christians. He seemed to be delighted by the idea that the whites are not Moslems."[17]

Most Mossi chiefs celebrated the end of Ramadan in a grander manner than they did Tabaski. The members of the royal household joined the other inhabitants of the capital in their anxious vigil for the crescent moon that was to herald the start of the ceremonies. There was general rejoicing when the moon appeared, and all through the night palace guards fired shots and launched arrows into the air. The following morning, the Mogho Naba went to the mosque with his courtiers to attend prayers. Then he returned to his palace to await the Imam, who came to offer prayers of thanksgiving. The Mogho Naba gave him presents, and was visited by gift-bearing

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Moslems. In return, he gave them millet water sweetened with honey, millet cakes, meat, and kola nuts.

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The celebration of the festival in the districts was not as imposing as it was at Ouagadougou, but we have Binger's excellent eyewitness account of the festivities at Sakhaboutenga:

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> First of all, Boukary sent word that he would like me to accompany him to Sakhaboutenga, where it is his custom to go on the day of the festival. The chief's men spent the entire day attending to preparations: they distributed powder, cleaned guns, tried on harnesses, and polished copper fittings as we would in France on the eve of a great parade. . . . It was an occasion for revelry, and they took full advantage of it. They ate as much as they could, drank a great deal of beer, and fired many rounds of ammunition. . . . In the evening there was a moment of consternation: no one had seen the crescent; however, they consoled themselves by repeating that although it had not been sighted here, it had certainly shown itself elsewhere, and they sat down to drink beer all night long.
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> Monday, June 11. Early this morning Boukary sent a horseman to Sakhaboutenga to consult the marabouts. The messenger soon returned and assured the chief that the moon will be seen tonight. "All the marabouts have said so." The much-desired crescent appeared for a few moments this evening; shots were fired through half the night, and beer ran in floods. . . .
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> Tuesday, June 12. From four o'clock in the morning, the tam-tams sounded everywhere, and everyone was busy; it is obvious that this is the eve of an important event. . . . Half an hour after our departure we arrived at Sakhaboutenga. We dismounted and camped under the trees at the entrance of the village. Some Moslems from the neighborhood came, greeted Boukary, and offered him some kola nuts in lots varying from five to eight. But they always held them out in a fold of their robe [it being forbidden for a commoner to hand a gift directly to a chief]. A village ..earby sent twelve large jars of beer.
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> From afar and from all directions, long files of Moslems emerged from the village on their way to the Imam's for prayers. Several onlookers arrived on donkeys from the surrounding countryside. The religious ceremony took place on a flat expanse to the east of the village. It was an impressive spectacle. The crowd was silent. The faithful, ranged in ranks about 20 feet deep, prostrated themselves and rose again in perfect harmony and with awesome slowness. From time to time the voice of the Imam was raised, and his *amina* [amen] was heard with deep reverence.
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> There were about three thousand persons of both sexes there, almost all of them dressed in white. The *bournous* [robes], the red tarbooshes, and the multitude of black faces lent to the ceremony the grandiose character of an oriental fete. As soon as the prayers were over, Boukary Naba walked up to the Imam of Sakhaboutenga to the sound of tam-tams to receive his blessing and the good wishes of the Moslems, who wished on my illustrious host many horses and warriors. Boukary Naba ordered that the Imam be given a magnificent sheep and several sheepskins full of cowries. He presents this

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gift every year to the Imam and to Karamakho Isa, for whom he has great veneration. These are old and wise men who cannot but give him excellent counsel.[18]

The relations between Boukary Koutou and the Moslems of the Sakhaboutenga district show how Mossi chiefs, though pagans, were able to establish viable political bonds with potentially hostile believers of another religion. Boukary Koutou was probably a Moslem "in outward appearance only," as Binger suggests. Nevertheless, it was by being Moslems of this kind that Mossi rulers managed to retain the allegiance of their Moslem subjects. This was their duty as "fathers of their people," and apparently they did it without much hesitation. In this manner, they effectively used religion to bolster their power and sustain their authority.

Ritual connections between the Mossi rulers and the chiefs of surrounding countries enabled them to protect their subjects from foreign attack and to maintain internal cohesion. The numerous reciprocal gifts between the Mossi and such other Voltaic groups as the Dagomba, Mamprusi, and Gurmanche were based on the belief in descent from a common ancestor or ancestress. Ritual and the supernatural thus played an extremely important role in the cohesiveness of the Mossi kingdoms and in the functioning of their governmental processes. Without these ritual factors, it is doubtful whether the Mossi rulers would have been able to maintain such a relatively high degree of control over their subjects, given the relative weakness of their economic resources, communications, and armed forces. In trying to understand why the Mossi retained their autonomy for so long, one must take into consideration the statement made by a French officer a year after the Mossi were conquered: "We must not lose sight of the fact that [the Mossi] have always presented a common front to strangers, and that a single word of command is sufficient to unite them against the invader in the name of kinship and national unity."[19]

The phase of Mossi political history that began when Nyennega left Dagomba and moved northward came to an end with the European conquest. Most French scholars believe that the Mossi were in a state of decadence at the time of conquest and might have fallen to such African conquerors as El Hadj Omar, Samory Touré, or Baba To. The fact remains, however, that these conquerors all skirted Mossi country without entering it. If these African rulers believed that the Mossi were invincible in their unity, it was because the Mossi, through mythical bonds of common descent and actual bonds of kinship, had welded themselves into a cohesive and powerful group.